

The U.S. welcomes a recent report by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent organization mandated by Congress to submit an annual report. The commission's 2008 report recommends that North Korea keep its U.S. State Department designation as a Country of Particular Concern for its systematic and severe violations of religious freedom. North Korea has been named a Country of Particular Concern by the State Department every year since 1999.

The Commission reports that refugee testimony provides evidence that North Koreans continue to face a well-founded fear of persecution if repatriated from China. The State Department's 2007 International Religious Freedom Report notes that "NGOs, defectors, and refugees have reported that the Government executed opponents of the regime in recent years.

Executed individuals reportedly included some targeted for religious activities such as proselytism and contact with foreigners or missionaries while in China." Refugee testimony confirms that repatriated North Korean refugees suffer harsh interrogation, torture, and prolonged detention, if it is discovered that they have either converted to Christianity while in China or had contact with South Koreans -- both of which are considered to be political offenses.

In an effort to supplant genuine religious belief, the North Korean government continues to promote a cult of personality around the ruling Kim family. Enthusiastic veneration of President Kim Jong-il and his father can advance careers and ensure access to daily necessities.

The State Department's International Religious Freedom report states that "refusal on religious or other grounds to accept the leader as the supreme authority, exemplifying the state and society's needs, was regarded as opposition to the national interest and sometimes resulted in severe punishment." Punishment may involve the imprisonment of up to three generations of one's family in the notorious political prison labor camps.

The United States remains concerned about the grave human rights abuses in North Korea, especially the denial of religious freedom. The U.S. stands with the North Korean people in their call for freedom. "We believe," said President George Bush, "it is every

person's basic right to live in freedom and dignity. We will continue to support the North Korean people as they strive to achieve the rights and freedoms to which they are entitled as human beings."